



Frequently Asked Questions about Critical Habitat for the Endangered La Graciosa thistle

Q. What is the La Graciosa thistle?

La Graciosa thistle (*Cirsium loncholepis*), a member of the sunflower family, forms a mound of spiny plants with white flowers. Each plant can reach 40 inches or more in height. The thistle occurs in coastal dune habitat and wetlands in areas of northern Santa Barbara County and southern San Luis Obispo County, including the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge. It grows among other low-growing plants such as sedge, salt grass, clover and silverweed.

Q. Why was the La Graciosa thistle listed as an endangered species?

Listed as endangered in March 2000, the plant is threatened by wetlands destruction and oil field and urban development.

Q. What is critical habitat?

Critical habitat is defined in the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as specific geographic areas that contain the physical and biological features essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that require special management considerations. Areas not occupied by the species may be designated if they are essential to the species' conservation. Critical habitat is determined using the best available scientific and commercial information about the physical and biological needs of the species. These needs include: space for individual and population growth, and for normal behavior; food, water, light, air and minerals, cover or shelter; habitat that is protected from disturbance or is representative of the historical geographic and ecological distribution of a species; and, for animals, sites for breeding, reproduction, and rearing of offspring.

Q. What areas have been designated as critical habitat?

The Service is proposing 41,089 acres as critical habitat. Private lands account for about 90 percent of the designation. The remaining acreage is on federal, state and county lands in coastal dune habitat and wetland areas of northern Santa Barbara County and southern San Luis Obispo County. Included in the critical habitat area in San Luis Obispo County are Pismo Dunes State Preserve, portions of Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area where vehicles are now allowed, and the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge. Portions of Rancho Guadalupe Dunes County Park in Santa Barbara County are also part of the designation.

The heavily used off-highway vehicle riding area within Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area was removed in the final designation because the plant does not occur or persist in this area, and the Service determined it is not essential for the conservation of the La Graciosa thistle. The owners of the former Unocal Guadalupe Oil Field – which is included in one of the critical habitat units – are in the process of decommissioning this facility. The Service is negotiating a conservation easement for it, and the easement would eventually be managed by the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge. Remediation and restoration activities are expected soon.

Q. Is all the acreage within the proposed boundaries critical habitat for the La Graciosa thistle?

Not all areas within the critical habitat boundaries contain the specific habitat features required by La Graciosa thistle. Existing man-made structures and mine quarries don't provide habitat for the thistle. However, they do sometimes occur within the critical habitat boundaries of the designation because of the limitations in the Service's ability to map the boundaries at a finer scale. However, these areas are not considered critical habitat.

Q. What types of activities might impact critical habitat for the thistle?

Activities that may destroy or appreciably reduce the value of critical habitat include those that alter the essential elements needed for La Graciosa thistle to such an extent that the plant's survival and recovery are appreciably diminished. Activities that negatively impact critical habitat may also jeopardize the continued existence of the species. These include: livestock grazing, mining, disking, fire management, off-road vehicle use, installing utility and communication lines, and the application or runoff of chemical or biological agents into the air, soil, or on native plants.

Q. Are economic impacts considered in the critical habitat designation?

The ESA requires the Service to consider potential economic impacts when determining whether or not to designate critical habitat. If the economic benefits of excluding an area as critical habitat outweigh the benefits of including it, the Service may exclude the area unless doing so would lead to the extinction of the species. An economic analysis on the designation of proposed critical habitat for the La Graciosa thistle, Gaviota tarplant, and Lompoc Yerba Santa, was released for public comment in May 2002 and has since been finalized.

Q. What protection does La Graciosa thistle receive as a listed species?

The ESA forbids the import, export, or interstate or foreign sale of protected animals and plants without a special permit. The ESA does not prohibit "take" of listed plants on private lands, but landowners must comply with state laws protecting imperiled plants. Section 7 of the ESA requires federal agencies to consult with the Service on actions they authorize, fund, or carry out that may affect a listed species or its critical habitat. In addition, the ESA requires that federal agencies not only take action to prevent further loss of a species, but also pursue actions to recover species to the point where they no longer require protection and can be delisted.

If a landowner needs a federal permit or receives federal funding for a specific activity within the critical habitat boundary that may destroy or adversely modify critical habitat, the agency responsible for issuing the permit or providing the funds consults with the Service to determine how the action may affect La Graciosa thistle. A project that will destroy or adversely modify critical habitat is one that will appreciably reduce the value of critical habitat for the survival and recovery of the species.

Q. Does critical habitat designation create preserves?

No. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other special conservation area. It does not allow government access to private lands, and will not result in closure of the area to all access or use.

Q. What is the process for designating critical habitat for a listed species?

The ESA requires the Service to identify critical habitat at the time a species is listed. However, in some cases, designating critical habitat may be considered “not prudent” if it would cause harm to the species, by, for example, increasing the possibility of collection or vandalism. Or the Service may find that such a designation is “not determinable” if there isn’t enough information to define areas as critical habitat when a species is listed.

In 1999, the Center for Biological Diversity and the California Native Plant Society filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California against the Service and the Secretary of the Interior for failure to designate critical habitat for La Graciosa thistle, Lompoc yerba santa, and Gaviota tarplant. In November 2001, critical habitat was proposed for the three plants, and a year later, the Service designated critical habitat for the latter two plants.

Q. Why was La Graciosa thistle not included in the former critical habitat designation?

The La Graciosa thistle was not included in the former designation pending review by botanists of its status as a distinct species. Preliminary botanical studies show La Graciosa thistle may be closely related to the elk thistle (*Cirsium scariosum*). Based on this analysis, botanists may propose a new taxon, *C. scariosum* var. *citrinum*; the new taxon will not replace the current nomenclature until it is peer reviewed and published. This review is still ongoing, and critical habitat is now being designated to fulfill requirements of a court order to designate critical habitat. After this review is published and within the constraints of available funding, the Service will, if necessary, reevaluate the critical habitat designation and the listing of the thistle.

More Questions?

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